

In the game of “What if?,” are you ready?

Planning evacuation for vulnerable populations

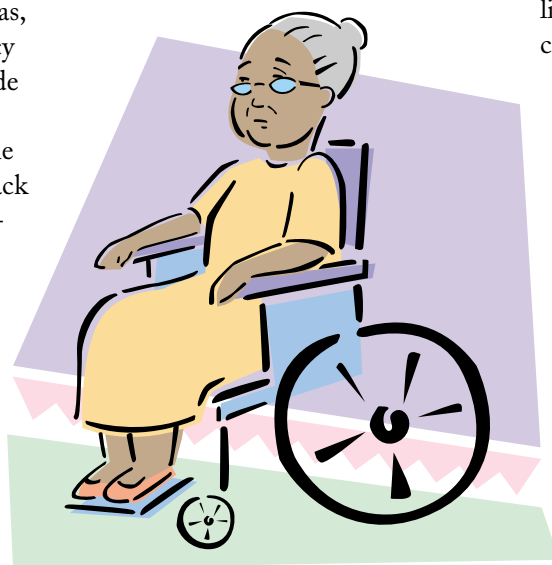
by Jacob Bustad

The 9/11 terrorist attacks and more recently the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina may have occurred far from Kansas, but the need for proper emergency preparedness in all states was made clear by these events. Included in this emergency preparedness is the need for evacuation planning, a lack of which can lead to tragic consequences like those in the Gulf Coast. It is important to remember that while most of the population may be able to evacuate on their own terms, the vulnerable populations of that same area—including the elderly, the disabled, those with limited English proficiency, and other populations that are considered transportation-service dependent—require strategies for evacuation by the transit services involved.

Both KDOT and the Kansas Rural Transit Assistance Program (KRTAP) are providing assistance to the rural transit providers that would likely be part of a team of responders to transport vulnerable populations in case of an emergency. The purpose of the technical support is to strengthen and develop the partnerships between local emergency planning committees and local transit agencies.

While the likelihood of a hurricane affecting Kansas is practically nonexistent, many other emergencies need to be considered when developing preparedness plans for a given

area. The U.S. Department of Transportation lists 11 possible emergency categories, including biological, chemical, nuclear and terrorist attacks, as well as natural disasters ranging from earthquake and flood-



ing to tornadoes and winter storms. Although the specific challenges involved in each of these scenarios might change, the efforts needed to locate and transport vulnerable populations are always essential.

Vulnerable populations

Vulnerable populations contain individuals who require specific considerations in emergency transportation planning, including some older adults, people with physical, hearing, visual, psychiatric, intellectual, learning and cognitive disabilities, people with limited English proficiency, and persons of low incomes. These populations are expected to continue to rise, especially the older population. A U.S. DOT strategy paper esti-

mates that by 2030 the population of persons 65 and older will double—this only makes the issue more important. The lack of English proficiency is noted because of a high correlation between this population and the use of community and public transportation. Language barriers can be a critical problem for these individuals, because it can keep them from gaining information during an emergency and they may not have access to private transportation in an emergency.

The first step in evacuation planning, then, is to identify people needing transportation assistance, made easier through a well-developed partnership network in the community. The agencies and organizations involved, from transportation providers to health and human services and even local faith-based organizations, can work together to both locate these populations and establish what transportation resources would be needed.

Disabled and senior citizens

One aspect of evacuation planning that emerged from Katrina was the need for special consideration of the challenge involved when moving people from hospital, nursing home and other medical facilities. A recent federal GAO report detailed the efforts made for these populations during Hurricane Charley in Florida and Katrina in Mississippi, and concluded that the basic decision of whether or not to evacuate a facility is just one of many challenges. Although state and local governments can order evacuations, health

care facilities are sometimes exempt from these orders. This again highlights the need for cooperation between all groups involved in emergency planning; many of the officials interviewed stressed the lack of transportation resources because local demand for transportation in an emergency would likely exceed supply. Also, the transportation resources available may not be able to properly serve members of these populations, who have specific mobility needs. Finally, these populations present a unique challenge in

ment, during the emergency, and during recovery operations. This last phase of recovery is another good example for receiving the potential benefits of emergency planning, as transportation resources could be situated where they could assist in recovery efforts.

To find out more about these efforts in Kansas, the United We Ride's Kansas Web site, www.ksunit-edweride.org, provides information and contacts. One of the current goals of United We Ride is to establish five regional sites as pilots for

evacuation coordination planning, and then to develop a one-day training module that will be based on haz-

Your agency may be able to handle day to day transportation for citizens with disabilities and limited mobility, but what if they need to be transported all at once?

ard and security planning training packages. The goal through this type of training is the cooperation of all agencies and organizations involved, which means proper evacuation planning can be achieved and the dangers of the unknown avoided.

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Sources:

Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities.

www.dotcr.ost.dot.gov/asp/emergencyprep.asp

Strategies In Emergency Preparedness for Transportation-Dependent Populations. National Consortium on the Coordination of Human Services Transportation, <http://www.dotcr.ost.dot.gov/Documents/Emergency/Emergency%20Preparedness%20Strategy%20Paper.doc>

Preliminary Observations on the Evacuation of Vulnerable Populations due to Hurricanes and Other Disasters. US Government Accountability Office Report. <http://www.gao.gov/htext/d06790t.html> ▲

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Originally the proposal held for only presidential declarations of emergency to trigger the procedures. However, in the Final Rule these procedures can be triggered by a declaration of emergency by a state governor or mayor of the District of Columbia, and by a Presidential declaration of emergency.

Comments received also asked about the need for relief from DOT regulations, and the new rule instructs grantees and subgrantees to submit a request for relief from the DOT in the same manner as relief from FTA. In this situation, the FTA and DOT will work very closely, and decisions will not be delayed because of any involvement between the two agencies.

There were also suggestions that the new rule would cause a change to the relationship between the states and the federal government in emergency situations. The response by FTA was to emphasize that the rule involves granting relief from existing requirements, and not implementing any new regulations. All current levels of power among the various governments would remain.

How the rule works

The new rule means that in a given situation, certain steps will be taken that will result in the Docket being used. Here's a hypothetical scenario: several tornadoes hit Sedgwick County, causing massive damage and impacting both citizens' mobility as well as their homes. In response to the emergency, the Governor declares Sedgwick County a disaster area. In order for transit agencies to act accordingly—moving populations to safe areas during recovery, for example—regulations currently in place

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Resources

Several resources are available for anyone involved in emergency preparedness and evacuation planning. The U.S. DOT Web site offers a page with information about emergency planning and the disabled, at www.dotcr.ost.dot.gov/asp/emergencyprep.asp, that also provides direct links to the strategy paper and checklist recently released by the DOT. The checklist outlines steps to effectively prepare for an emergency, and separates these steps between those taken during planning, when an emergency is immi-

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would need to be deviated from to maximize the efficiency of the agencies' actions. In this situation, the agencies would request relief from the regulations through petitions to the Emergency Relief Docket, which would mean that the proper actions can be taken without waiting for approval from FTA, DOT or both. If the emergency can be anticipated (such as a hurricane), the Emergency Relief Docket will be opened by the FTA in advance of the event; if the emergency cannot be anticipated, the Docket will be opened within two business days of the emergency or disaster declaration.

Petitions must be posted in the Docket to receive consideration from FTA, and the docket will be accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at dms.dot.gov. Petitions can also be submitted by mail to the DOT Docket Management Facility,

Room PL-401, 400 7th Street, SW, Washington, DC 20590.

All petitions must:

- a) Identify the grantee or subgrantee and its geographic location;
- b) Specifically address how an FTA requirement in a policy statement, circular, or agency guidance will limit a grantee's or subgrantee's ability to respond to an emergency or disaster;
- c) Identify the policy statement, circular, guidance document and/or rule from which the grantee or subgrantee seeks relief; and
- d) Specify if the petition for relief is one-time or ongoing, and if ongoing, identify the time period for which the relief is requested. The time period may not exceed three months; however, additional time may be requested through a second petition for relief.

After the petition is entered into the docket, relief will be conditionally granted for three business days from the date it was submitted. During the three days, FTA will review the peti-

tion and may request further information from the grantee or subgrantee making the request. FTA will then post a decision on the Emergency Relief Docket. If FTA fails to post a decision within the three business days, the grantee or subgrantee may assume its petition is granted until and unless FTA states otherwise.

For more information on the new Final Rule, as well as further explanation of the comments made during the comment period and responses by the FTA, the *Federal Register* can be accessed at <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/>. Go to "Search our Publications."

Source:

"Emergency Procedures for Public Transportation Systems." *Federal Register*. January 9, 2007 72:5, accessed online January 18, 2007. <http://frwebgate3.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/waisgate.cgi?WAISdocID=15654332145+12+0+0&WAISaction=retrieve> ▲